# Ethnicised Spectatorship in the Malaysian Film *Nasi Lemak 2.0*

**Ngo Sheau-Shi**

*School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Minden, Pulau Pinang, MALAYSIA*
E-mail: sheaushi@usm.my

## ABSTRACT

*Namewee, a contemporary filmmaker in Malaysia, has made himself increasingly popular since 2007 by criticising the government and posting racist remarks in social media. In 2011, Namewee produced and directed a controversial film: Nasi Lemak 2.0. Given the highly racialised and politicised backdrop of this work, this article intends to examine the subtext of the film as a significant cultural artefact used to reconstruct meaning and identity in the context of a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysian society. The main argument presented here is that the subtext of Nasi Lemak 2.0 offers a spectatorial position strongly linked to the Chinese male protagonist. This ethnicised spectatorship provides a symptomatic field with which to reconstruct and reinforce Malaysia's long held racial ideology which is rooted in the country's colonial past.*

**Keywords:** *ethnic portrayal, Malaysian cinema, multiculturalism, Namewee, spectatorship*

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysian cinema embarked upon a new chapter in 2010 with the production of numerous multicultural films. Films produced in languages other than Bahasa Malaysia—the national language—have been steadily gaining traction within the mainstream Malaysian film industry.

Given the multicultural and segregated nature of the Malaysian context, the growing popularity of these films in contemporary Malaysian society demands a reconsideration of the notion of multicultural cinema within the context of post-colonial Malaysia. To this end, one must acknowledge the potentially divisive issue of racial politics in Malaysia and its inextricable role in the newly emerging multilingual Malaysian cinema. *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) was highly controversial because it addressed the various subjectivities from a range of cultural, political and ideological positions. In addition, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* depicted the issues of ethnic and class conflict in Malaysia's multicultural society. This article intends to examine whether the film, as a popular-cultural expression of contemporary Malaysian audiences, promotes multiculturalism from the perspective of racial equality, or whether it simply reinforced the ideological constructs of racism and issues of ethnicity within Malaysia that have roots in the divide-and-rule policy of the country's colonial past.

**The Ethnicised Spectatorship in the Malay(sian) Films**

Emerging in the 1970s, the theory of spectatorship in cinema provides an important paradigm with which to scrutinise the cinematic apparatus as a cultural institution used to enable dominant social ideologies (Mayne 1993). Althusser (1994) emphasises that "ideology has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects…ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning". This notion of ideology has since become one of the most basic assumptions underlying the theory of spectatorship. The relationship between ideology and film, therefore, can be scrutinised through the framework of "spectatorship", transforming the audience into interpellated subjects representative of "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser 1994). In other words, viewed from the perspective of a mechanistic cultural artefact, cinema should be understood within the framework of the institutionalised "audience", or as better known in film studies—the "spectator". Given that the dominant cinematic discourse assigns a certain identity, be it an ethnic or racial identity, and offers the spectator an ideologically embedded subject position, it is important to undertake a thorough examination of how the fundamental structure of cinema (i.e. the narrative structure and camera work) contribute to the creation of the mode of subjectivity for ethnicity.

*Ngo Sheau-Shi*

Since the early 20th century, Malay cinema has served as an important visual technology, capturing the cultural imagination and contributing to the construction of identities for those living in the region. Riding on the popularity of traditional *bangsawan* Malay theatre, early filmmakers from India and investors from China seized upon the opportunity to reproduce and commercialise *bangsawan* performances in cinema. This particular cultural-technological fusion flavoured visual forms in early Malay cinema with the effect of eliciting a strong sense of cosmopolitanism (Hassan 2013: 2–3). However, the cosmopolitical narrative that had pervaded traditional *bangsawan* underwent significant streamlining with the implementation of the National Cultural Policy (NCP) in the 1970s. This policy aimed to nationalise the performing arts based on Malay culture (Tan 1993: 179–188). At the same time, the Malay film industry simultaneously went through a process whereby otherwise popular multicultural or multi-ethnic images reproduced in Malay films became suitably more Malay in terms of their representation, culture, values, customs and beliefs (Hatta 1997: 188). As such, Malay cinema began to portray not only cultural segregation amongst the various ethnic groups in multicultural Malaysian society, but began to reflect a constructed "Malay" spectatorship.

As for Malaysian Chinese spectatorship, the absence of a Malaysian Chinese screen representation in Malaysian cinema created a cultural vacuum that could only be filled by early Chinese-language films from Shanghai, and later Hong Kong and Taiwan (Ngo 2011). The early 21st century, however, has witnessed unprecedented advancements in digital film-making technology. These advancements have resulted in an industrial environment more conducive to the portrayal of a diversified Malaysian society in film. Moreover, with the relaxing of financial constraints on filmmakers and the growth of an emerging international market for art house cinema, young and independent Malaysian filmmakers have embraced opportunities to produce films outside of commercial conventions. Traditionally, Malaysian independent films have stressed a diversity of cinematic styles, approaches and subject matters; however, Khoo (2007) suggests that these newer independent films are neither universalist nor pluralist. Instead, they regard diversity as a basic fact, not a problem; therefore, one of the key features of these films is their depiction of multiracial, multicultural and cosmopolitical engagement with humanism, particularly within the contemporary urban Malaysian setting (Khoo 2007: 233–234). This increased portrayal of a diversified Malaysian society in local films has resulted in multi-ethnic cinema-goers paying more attention to Malaysian films, with

the market having until now been dominated by foreign films from Hollywood, Hong Kong, Bollywood or Tollywood.

**The State, Market and the Development of a Malaysian Multilingual Film Industry**

The role of the state in the development of Malaysian cinema has become increasingly important since the 1970s. Indeed, the NCP, introduced in 1971, set the ethno-religious tone for national cinema. This policy explains how Malaysian national cinema has been ethnocentrically-shaped as Malay cinema. Wan Zawawi (2005) observes that the NCP mandates the depiction of Islam and the Malay language as the ultimate defining artistic and cultural symbols of Malaysian national identity. Nevertheless, other cultural elements may be accepted as coexisting alongside the national culture on the condition that they do not contradict Islam or Malay culture. That said, much has changed since the introduction of the NCP, and conceptions of identity and culture are increasingly seen as fluid constructions, particularly within the global context, thus challenging the validity and effectiveness of the NCP (Wan Zawawi 2005). The original narrow definition of Malay(sian) national cinema, which was based on the Malay language, has been criticised not only by the non-Malay community, but also within ostensibly Malay communities. There are two cases in point which are worthy of discussion.

First, in 2010, the controversial emergence of a Malaysian Chinese-language film, Ah Niu's directorial debut of *Ice Kacang Puppy Love*, won over local Chinese-speaking audiences and opened up a new cultural landscape for non-Malay language cinema in Malaysia. The then minister for the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture, Dr. Rais Yatim, announced that the definition of Malaysian national cinema would change to be more inclusive of non-Malay language films, provided that they were produced locally (Raman, Zulkifli and Lee 2010). Before this, films in which less than 60% of spoken dialogue were in the Malay language were considered foreign films, meaning that producers were not entitled to entertainment tax incentives or to compulsory screening for exhibitors. The box office success of *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* not only captured the attention of authorities, but resulted in the setting of new standards in defining Malaysian national cinema. These changes subsequently led to a revitalised Malaysian film industry in which a Malaysian Chinese-language film industry flourished alongside, and eventually developing into mainstream cinema.

*Ngo Sheau-Shi*

Second, backlash over the creation of a Best Non-Malay Film category in the 28th Malaysia Film Festival 2016 demonstrated the existence of lively and healthy debate amongst creative communities who stood against institutional inequality in the film industry. Numerous well-known Malay creative talents, such as the president of the Screenwriters Association of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Alfie Palermo, director Afdlin Shauki, the assistant-general secretary of the Film Directors' Association of Malaysia, Hafiz Ibrahim and two-time award winner of the best cinematographer, Mohd Nor Kassim, protested against the organisers having used language differences as an excuse to reinforce ethnic segregation in the film industry (*Malaysiakini* 9th August 2016). The message was loud and clear; Malays refused to be segregated and were not afraid of competition based on merit. Nevertheless, Datuk Rahim Awang, the secretary of the Film Directors' Association of Malaysia, disagreed, perceiving the incorporation of languages other than standard Malay into Malaysian national cinema as akin to insulting the Federal Constitution (*The Star Online* 9th August 2016). Disagreements aside, this long overdue recognition of other commonly used languages and cultures in Malaysian popular cinema has resulted in not only an increasingly competitive and technically competent local filmmaking environment, but has opened the door for local filmmakers to compete at an international level by exploring the potentially huge market outside of Malaysia.

In the process, from the independent film movement to mainstream cinema, the Malaysian multilingual film industry has contributed to an understanding of the complex relationship between political negotiation and market influences – two important forces pervasive throughout contemporary national cinema in Malaysia. Owing to its greater market, contemporary Malaysian national cinema is in favour of a consociation model with a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multicultural characteristic. This situation would suggest that a multicultural and multi-ethnic model of spectatorship might constitute an important framework from which to analyse contemporary Malaysian films, particularly those portraying multiculturalism. Consequently, this article aims to reveal how the cinematic construct of ethnicised spectatorship was achieved through the specificities of film language. In other words, the subject position that is being offered to the spectator within the film's subtext is no longer seen as a natural or a unified position because it is in the filmic process itself that the modes of inscription on film acquire their full significance. As Willemen puts it, the subject-spectator "casts in the role of 'invisible subject' identifying itself to the camera as the punctual source of the look, which constitutes the image along the lines of ideological

mechanisms" (Willemen 1976). It is also important to note that cinema audiences are generally heterogeneous and such, may respond to a film in a multitude of different ways or have their own ways of either accepting or challenging the spectator position offered by the film text.

**The History of Pluralism and Multiculturalism in Malaya and Malaysia**

The multicultural setting of colonial Malaya, and later Malaysia, is best described as pluralist, not multiculturalist. In the early 19th century, the British Empire had practiced a doctrine of imperialism and colonialism through the East India Company, importing into Malaya massive numbers of migrant labourers, predominantly from China and India. Furnivall observed the nature of pluralism in colonial Malaya, describing that it comprised various groups or "social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit" (Furnivall 1944). More worrying, this political unit existed in the complete absence of a common social will, bound together simply market and commercial interests. A case in point can be found amongst Chinese immigrants and the process of their integration into local society. According to Wang Gungwu, most early Chinese immigrants saw themselves as transient workers who would eventually return to China. By 1900, however, Chinese immigrants to Malaya were increasingly laying down roots for a more permanent settlement, becoming an entirely settled population by the mid-1940s (Means 1970). From 1911 to 1941, British authorities encouraged women from China to join their male counterparts in Southeast Asia. This policy would eventually see the mushrooming of locally-born Chinese families in Malaya (Wang 1959). This in turn led to the development of settlements of immigrant Chinese who were attracted by emergent economic interests and job opportunities in a Malaya that could be a permanent home for Chinese (Heng 1998). Thus, the aspiration of securing a permanent settlement in Malaya became a reality, resulting in the establishment of a permanent Chinese presence in terms of language, cultural orientation and modes of education. Nevertheless, Chinese immigrants also had to content with the knowledge that their future in Malaya was full of profound political, economic and cultural uncertainties. In 1957, the Federation of Malaya gained its independence from British colonial rule. Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak joined the Federation of Malaya in 1963. With the formation of Malaysia, the process of nation-building faced increasing conflict between two contesting perspectives: ethno-nationalism under the ethnic majority Malays, or multi-ethnic and multicultural nationalism (Cheah 2007).

Revisiting the history of Malaysian pluralism, Hefner (2001) argues that plural societies had long existed in the Malayo-Indonesia archipelago well before the arrival of Western colonialism. The region had long been a bustling melting pot of mixed traders and visitors from different parts of the world; as such, cultural mobility and hybridity was very common throughout the region. Hefner (2001) refers this phenomenon as "canopied ethnicity", which characterises the flexibility of rich integration and cultural exchange in terms of food, language, social etiquette, dress and sense of aesthetics within a plural society. The very existence of the *Peranakan* community is a testimony to the sort of hybrid ethnic groups that could emerge out of this rich melting pot. The *Peranakan* Chinese, in particular, are the descendants of Chinese immigrants who came to the Malayo-Indonesian archipelago as early as 15th century. The intermarriage of male Chinese merchants with local women allowed for a natural form of Sino-Malay syncretic acculturation that would later give rise to a unique ethnic subgroup: the *Peranakan* Chinese. This historical evolution suggests that the flexible pluralism and largely unencumbered process of multicultural naturalisation had long been a source of strength and vitality for the region. However, the arrival of European colonialism in the 19th century reorganised the various Asian communities with a clear divide-and-rule policy. The creation of such supra-ethnic categories, especially in colonial Malaya, would eventually give rise to the binary oppositional distinction between indigenous *bumiputra*, which literally means "son-of-the-soil" (mainly Malay and other indigenous people), versus the *non-bumiputra* (especially Chinese and India) (Hefner 2001).

Despite a long history of pluralistic and cosmopolitical interaction, the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of post-colonial Malaysian society presented a challenge to Malaysia's political, economic and social evolution after the tragic events of 13th May 1969, which represents a dark stain on the history of Sino-Malay relations. The affirmative introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971–1990) sought to redress issue of poverty and economic disparity within the bumiputra community. The NEP required a statutory quota of 30% of indigenous (mainly Malay) equity and management participation in business and the public area, such as public services, university placement and scholarships. The implementation of the NEP significantly improved the economic status of the Malays, resulting in the emergence of a new Malay middle class that would span not only the rural *bumiputra*s engaged in agricultural activities, but urban Malays with the creation of more professional job opportunities. This situation in turn created a new public space for the

56

*Wacana Seni Journal of Arts Discourse. Jil./Vol.18. 2019*

interaction of different ethnicities in which they would be compelled to mingle with one another (Abdul Rahman 2001). Many Chinese businessmen were forced to adopt collaborative and accommodative employment and organisational strategies at the behest of the state-led development and industrialisation (Heng and Sieh-Lee 2000). While this new configuration of wealth redistribution and power sharing amongst all races might be regarded as the source of success for political stability in Malaysia's post-colonial nation-building efforts, the NEP was ostensibly aimed at solving only the problem of poverty amongst the bumiputra. As such, the NEP has always been regarded as highly discriminatory and racist, especially in relation to underprivileged *non-bumiputra* citizens. According to Gomez, Saravanamuttu and Maznah (2013), the long-term implementation of the NEP, National Development Policy and National Vision Policy resulted in two forms of inequality: horizontal and vertical. First, horizontal inequality is that which enhances the ethnic dominance of Malay hegemony at the expense of the *non-bumiputra*, thus further dividing inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia. Vertical inequality, on the other hand, is measured within groups and concerns privileged social classes within an ethnic community.

For nearly five decades, this institutional imbalance has been the main source of national discontent. Moreover, the construction of ethnic identities in contemporary Malaysia has been widely politicised with the continuation of the party politics established along ethno-religious lines. Therefore, ethnic identity in Malaysia cannot be fully understood without some prior understanding of the cultural basis of political communities in Malaysia. This textual analysis, therefore, connects the imagined ethnicised spectator position with the contemporary context of ethnic politics in Malaysia.

**NAMEWEE AND HIS FILM**

Wee Meng Chee – better known as Namewee – first made headlines in July 2007 after rapping the Malaysian national anthem in a YouTube video using allegedly seditious lyrics (*Malaysiakini* 2007). Since then, Namewee has been exceptionally vocal in racially related socio-political issues in Malaysia via the internet. His satirical lyrics and music videos are often used to criticise the constitutionally protected special rights of Malays, the dominance of Islam and social injustices that relate to the structural power imbalance that exists within the context of post-colonial Malaysia. In addition, Namewee has often been described as a

"racist" who constantly incites or responds to racial antagonism through the convenience and ready availability of new media (Chua 2010). Some argue that Namewee's approach to racial discourse in popular culture has opened up the possibility for new negotiation in cultural politics. It should also be noted that Namewee received enormous publicity and was portrayed as the hero of ethnic minorities (or more specifically in this case, the hero of the ethnic Chinese community in Malaysia) for constantly challenging social taboos that have been otherwise considered unassailable since Malaysia's independence. However, it is also extremely risky to assume that an open discussion of racial taboos would not fall into the existing racist rhetoric or ideology.

Namewee's first movie, *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, was a successful independent-turn-mainstream film. In 2010, Namewee announced his plan to produce his first feature film aimed at portraying "1Malaysia"[1] from a self-proclaimed Chinese perspective (Namewee 2010a). Namewee applied for government funding, but was promptly turned down. This rejection of government funding for Namewee's movie quickly became a hotly politicised issue, with Namewee meeting various government ministers and asking to meet with the then prime minister, simultaneously aggrandising himself by posting more video clips about film on YouTube (Namewee 2010b). *Nasi Lemak 2.0* was finally made in 2011; it was self-funded with less than RM1 million but earned gross revenues of about RM7 million. Since then, Namewee has gone on to become a prolific filmmaker, singer, artist, actor and producer, not only in Malaysia but also internationally.

The producer of *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, Fred Chong, claimed that the film was "the culmination of the nation's moves toward national cohesiveness, with each ethnic community contributing an element to the national dish" (Khoo 2014). Nonetheless, according to a journalist in *Utusan Online*, Namewee continued to be seen as a racist Chinese chauvinist who had hurt the feelings of the Malay community (*Malaysiakini* 2011). Given this highly racialised and politicised backdrop for the production of *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, it is important to examine the discourses that have been generated by this film within the existing dominant mode of cinematic representation that is productive in nature and is entrenched in the dominant racial ideology. Therefore, a proper analysis must go further in order to provide a more theoretically informed description of the film's ideological operation instead of merely revealing the elements of the story.

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF *NASI LEMAK 2.0*: THE ETHNICISED SPECTATORSHIP**

According to Bordwell and Thompson (2008), the narrative within a film represents the "chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space". Narrative can also be defined in terms of how a story is told or how a series of plots might be explicitly structured within a certain screen time. Story, on the other hand, refers to the audiences' interpretation or what they infer from the events that are not explicitly presented. In other words, plot refers to everything visibly and audibly presented the audience in a film. Therefore, it is important to examine how plots are structured within a film in order to justify the meanings that are constructed rather than dealing simply with the interpretation of a story, with such interpretations being subject to the experiences of individual audience members. Meaning, which is constructed based upon the narrative structure, can to a large extent be read as the spectator position – inviting individual audience members to become embedded in the production of an ideology. Therefore, meaning serves to reinforce the imaginary relationship between individuals and the conditions of their existence.

This article, therefore, employs textual analysis to de-construct the embedded subject position of the spectator of *Nasi Lemak 2.0* in order to destabilise the ethnic identity of being "Chinese" within the context of contemporary Malaysia. Being a "Chinese", in this particular context, involves being a part of a collective awareness of one's subjugated political status under Malay hegemony. With this awareness comes a perceived need to make a constant effort to preserve one's sense of superiority to a differentiated ethnic category. This amounts to a hardening of the ideology of race or racism as the politicisation of ethnicity, which is still the mainstay of a lingering social engineering of the old politics, as previously discussed.

*Nasi lemak* actually refers to a local Malay dish of rice cooked with coconut cream and usually eaten together with fried anchovies, hard-boiled egg, slices of cucumber and a sambal chilli. *Nasi lemak* is a well-known and affordable dish that has become a popular everyday foodstuff for most Malaysians, regardless of cultural background. As explained in the ending of the film, each of the ingredients in *nasi lemak* has its own distinguished flavour; nonetheless, each respective taste compliments the other when mixed together. In other words, the title suggests that the central theme of the film uses food as an analogue for plural and multicultural identities in Malaysia. The main agents of the narrative are themselves multi-ethnic characters. Therefore, the following textual analysis focus not only on the main

narrative, but also on how the significant "others" in the film are portrayed in order to evaluate whether the film promotes a healthy multicultural society in terms of mutual understanding and respecting cultures.

The narrative structure of this film is linear and fits well into what Syd Field (1979) describes as the classical paradigm of screenplay, consisting of three main acts: the beginning (set-up), middle (confrontation) and the end (resolution). In the case of *Nasi Lemak 2.0*, the film is developed by alternating between two main plotlines. As shown in Figure 1 (Chart A), the first plot line demonstrates how the story progresses through the main character, Huang Daxia (played by Namewee), as the agent to build up a series of events/effects that eventually form the primary theme of multiculturalism. The film uses food to construct the struggle of the male protagonist about his two-fold identities based upon his nationality and ancestry: Malaysian-Chinese. The lack of localised flavour in Huang's cooking results in a lack of business and thus financial hardship. This financial difficulty plunges Huang into abject misery, which in turn stimulates his journey to learn about local flavours from various sources as identified in the first plot line. In other words, food defines the conflict faced by the character and the negotiation of his cultural identity versus national identity. The second plot line (as shown in Figure 1 [Chart B]) serves as the motif in the narrative to complicate the conflict by adding another dimension to the process of identity crisis between a Chinese-Malaysian versus a mainland Chinese that requires resolution through a cooking competition. As shown in Chart A and Chart B, these plot lines run parallel to one another and crisscross each other while simultaneously cross-referencing and contributing to the protagonist's goal of self-searching and reconciliation with his essentialised ethnic identities.
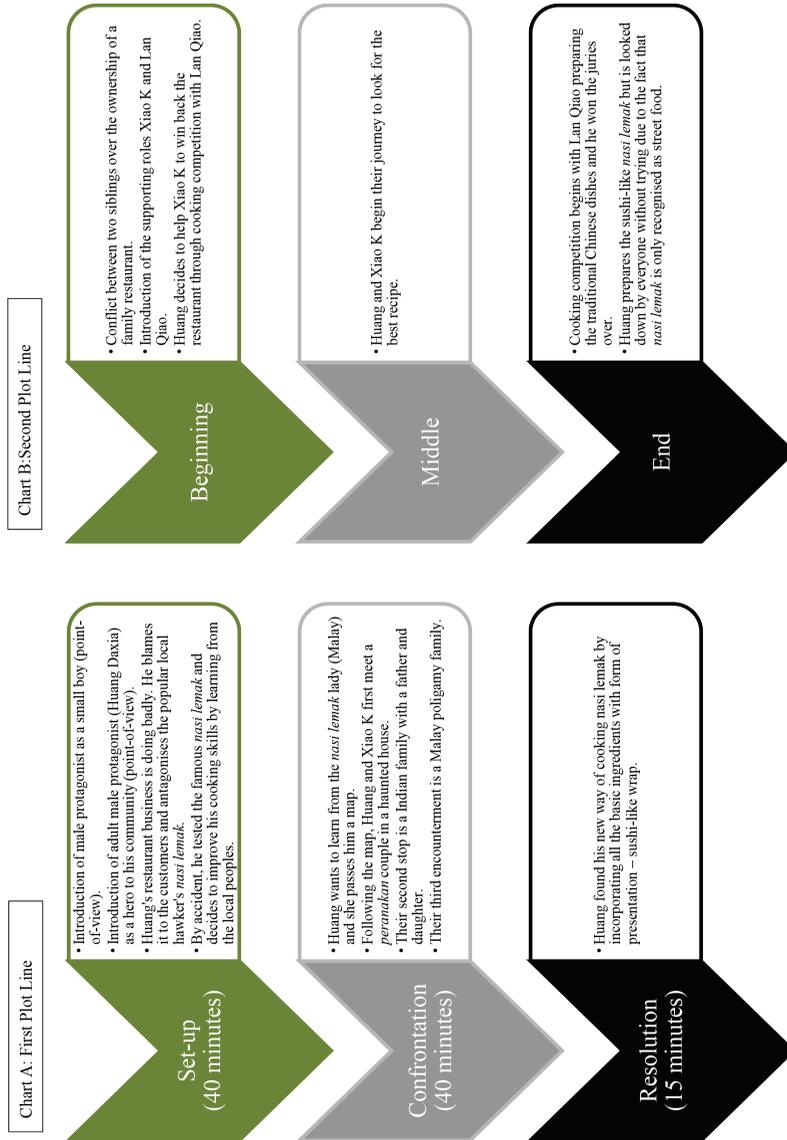
Chart B: Second Plot Line

**Beginning**

- Conflict between two siblings over the ownership of a family restaurant.
- Introduction of the supporting roles Xiao K and Lan Qiao.
- Huang decides to help Xiao K to win back the restaurant through cooking competition with Lan Qiao.

**Middle**

- Huang and Xiao K begin their journey to look for the best recipe.

**End**

- Cooking competition begins with Lan Qiao preparing the traditional Chinese dishes and he won the juries over.
- Huang prepares the sushi-like *nasi lemak* but is looked down by everyone without trying due to the fact that *nasi lemak* is only recognised as street food.

Chart A: First Plot Line

**Set-up (40 minutes)**

- Introduction of male protagonist as a small boy (point-of-view).
- Introduction of adult male protagonist (Huang Daxia) as a hero to his community (point-of-view).
- Huang's restaurant business is doing badly. He blames it to the customers and antagonises the popular local hawker's *nasi lemak*.
- By accident, he tested the famous *nasi lemak* and decides to improve his cooking skills by learning from the local peoples.

**Confrontation (40 minutes)**

- Huang wants to learn from the *nasi lemak* lady (Malay) and she passes him a map.
- Following the map, Huang and Xiao K first meet a *peranakan* couple in a haunted house.
- Their second stop is a Indian family with a father and daughter.
- Their third encounterment is a Malay poligamy family.

**Resolution (15 minutes)**

- Huang found his new way of cooking nasi lemak by incorporating all the basic ingredients with form of presentation – sushi-like wrap.

**Figure 1** Comparison between the first and second plotlines in a chronological screen timeline.

Thus far we have identified that the primary agent of action in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* is the male protagonist whose characterisation is based on his attitudes, habits and psychological drives of being a cultural subject entrenched in his Chinese roots and imagery. To this end, the name of the male protagonist, Huang Daxia, possesses interesting cultural connotations. The surname *Huang* literally means "yellow". This is a surname commonly used in reference to the Yellow Emperor, suggesting that the lead character might have a strong connection via Chinese ancestral origin. *Daxia* literally means "great chivalric hero" and is a word commonly appearing in association with traditional Chinese martial arts. In the film, the male protagonist is seen wearing traditional Chinese costumes and practicing kung fu to display his heroic chivalrous spirit in defence of his all-Chinese community in their troubles with social injustice. Furthermore, his background, as someone who had graduated from a prestigious cooking school in China, suggests strong ties with his cultural past. Huang Daxia now finds himself running his own Chinese restaurant in Malaysia where he aims to protect "pure" and "authentic" Chinese flavours in his cuisine. It is evident that this particular set-up is establishing the spectator position in the character of Huang Daxia, drafting him in the perspective of a self-proclaimed Chinese defender of Chinese chauvinistic position. The logic of the narrative further builds upon the sympathy towards Huang and his image as the local hero, particularly to his homogeneous all-Chinese community. Although the set-up of the film also pays lip service to some local socioeconomic issues faced by the people; nevertheless, the overwhelmingly emphasis on his "Chineseness" overshadows the portrayal of inequality within the film. It is important to point out that the cinematically constructed racial subjectivity in the beginning of the narrative is an ideologically embedded subject position for essentialising the so-called Chinese identity, closing the gap between different notions of the biological race versus socially constructed ethnic identity. As discussed previously, one of the major challenges in post-colonial multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysian society has been the domination of the UMNO-led authoritarian ruling regimen with their agenda of perpetuating an institutionalised racial discourse based on the threat and fear of the loss of Malay rights and special privileges. To this end, the popular discourses of race or ethnicity have always been politicised for vote baiting through prejudice and stereotypes (Loh 2009). However, the underlying motive of this film, and what made it so immediately controversial, was that it questioned Malay special rights by employing an ultra-Chinese chauvinist approach via the construction of the Chinese hero for a cinematically constructed Chinese spectator position. The issue of inequality within Malaysia's multi-ethnic society cannot be addressed so long as a party keeps reinforcing its morally correct position. Such gestures only provide justification to those political parties that have been established along racial demarcation, hence the status quo.

**PROBLEMS WITH THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE "OTHERS"**

Nevertheless, the ethnicised Chinese spectatorship alone, as discussed in the previous section, does not really invite any criticism. The real issue concerns how other ethnic groups have been portrayed in the film, thus revealing the racist overtones in this film. These racist overtones are particularly apparent in the confrontational part (as shown in the middle section of Figure 1 [Chart A]) when Huang and Xiao K kick start their journey to look for the best recipe for a cooking competition. In contrast to the predominantly Malaysian-Chinese spectator position as discussed earlier, significant "others" here are represented through various supporting roles in the characters, which spans from tokenism, simplistic portrayals, stereotyping to offences that have been thinly disguised as comedy and humour. It is, therefore, important to highlight how the images of "others" have been represented in order to examine what types of oppression and privilege have been reinforced through cinema.

Firstly, the representation of the old *Peranakan* Chinese couple in the film confirms the cultural dilemma facing their extinction. The *Peranakan* Chinese, or *Baba Nonya*, as discussed earlier in this article, are commonly thought to be one of the most interesting communities to have emerged out of the natural acculturation between immigrant Chinese men and local women when there was little state control or regulation at the turn of the 20th century. Consequently, the descendants of such mixed ethnic ancestry present a hybrid nature. However, instead of highlighting the rich and mixed material culture of the *Peranakan*, such as their ethnographic furniture, porcelain, embroidery, fashion, rituals, architecture, music or and dance, the stylistic substance of the film focused on the construction of the ghostly atmosphere of the *Peranakan* family. With the help of some cheap filmic techniques set in a spooky colonial building, the old couple appeared ghost-like, as though they were a lingering presence still hanging around the house. To be fair, the film did pay lip service to *Peranakan* food through its introduction of *Nonya* cuisine. However, the portrayal of the *Peranakan* Chinese couple as haunting the present ensures that the audience is distracted from wanting to see any deeper portrayal of *Peranakan* culture or food. As such, having chosen to avoid any serious discussion of the rich culture of the *Baba Nonya*, the filmmaker portrays the *Peranakan* Chinese couple as being enigmatic of an imaginary past whose existence belongs to a fading history.

A similar strategy has been used to portray the stereotype of Indian culture; employing a song-and-dance sequence to construct a happy-go-lucky community with the lyrics literally describing how the actors and actresses love to hide themselves behind a tree while singing a love song. A distinct rhythm, borrowed from Hindi songs, is easily identified, while the Chinese lyrics fit in well to represent a hybrid popular art form of the two cultures. This particular technique is interesting because it demonstrates the beauty and fun of combining two cultures while remaining entertaining. This ideal cultural hybridisation is briefly demonstrated through the theory of curry powder, which requires a variety of mixes and the right balance of quantities for the formula to work. The problem arises when the camera's perspective is sutured to Huang's gaze, functioning as the active male gaze, while looking at the Indian daughter (played by Nadine Ann Thomas) of the Curry Master (played by David Arumugam). In particular, one extra scene shows the Curry Master's daughter taking a bath by the riverside as Huang is staring at her while preparing a curry paste with a mortar and a giant pestle (perhaps a symbolic reference to a phallus). These shot-reverse-shots suggest highly sexualised camera manipulation by appropriating Huang as the active male gaze and the Curry Master's daughter as a sexual object whose function is simply to be looked at, thus creating a passive and less powerful spectatorial position for what we generally perceive of as "Indian". Such representations of Indian identity provide a clear example of how the Malaysian Indian community is marginalised without dealing with any of the systemic problem plaguing this community, such as poverty and social injustice. Again, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* represents only an ultra-Chinese perspective, demonstrating a complete lack of understanding towards "others", except for only superficial impressions through popular Bollywood song-and-dance routines.

*Nasi Lemak 2.0* employs two differing strategies with respect to the representation of Malays, that of friendly co-existence and superficial stereotypes. The first point refers to the character played by Adibah Noor, who sells the best roadside *nasi lemak*. At first, Adibah Noor serves as opposition to the male protagonist. However, this antagonistic relationship quickly takes a positive turn after Adibah Noor lays out a roadmap for Namewee's journey towards learning about local cuisines. Significantly, Adibah Noor also practices the Chinese martial art of *tai chi*, emphasising the philosophy of balance and equality between *yin* and *yang*. In one scene, Adibah Noor is seen to be the *tai chi* instructor for a group of practitioners, suggesting a profound sense of cultural diversity. Here, the mood in the film becomes extremely peaceful and friendly, with these images suggesting a state of harmonious co-existence between the

various ethnic groups in contemporary Malaysia. The second point concerns the portrayal of a naively happy polygamy family without any reference to the complexity of the issue. The husband (played by Afdlin Shauki) is surrounded by his beautiful wives who are flattering him by hand feeding him. The Malay wives are also portrayed as wearing *sarong* and flaunting their sexiness in a dream sequence. Such portrayals of the Malay are clearly constructed from a non-Malay perspective, in this case, by the Chinese protagonist—Namewee. When the representation of the Malay female is confronted with the Chinese male gaze, again we see an unequal and ethnicised cinematic gaze; the subject of vision is superior (i.e. active) over the object being represented (i.e. passive). This kind of representation of the Malay identity deepens the sense of uneasiness and insecurity of Malay spectatorship, and may even facilitate the rejection of multiculturalism as has been represented in this film. Furthermore, the cinematic strategy of employing funny and comical elements within the scene seems to cherish harmony and a sense of contentment, but at the same time suggests ignorance that could contribute to offence and misunderstanding in the Malay community because these portrayals fail to address the conflicts facing Malay women who might be torn between conservative Islamic practices and modern views of sexuality and gender roles.

The ending of the film focuses on the competition between Huang and the antagonist chef from China. This scene demonstrates a somewhat typical cinematic strategy in many so-called nationalist films, the portrayal of xenophobia and the need to punish the outsider in the narrative closure. Without exception, this film constantly condemns mainland Chinese as cheaters of money and love, particularly at the end of the film. The character played by Namewee himself, however, is revealed to be a symbolic contradiction; the hero of the day who happily embraces his negotiated local identity as a Malaysian-Chinese. Clearly, considerably more thought has gone into the formulation of Namewee's character. Nonetheless, it is highly problematic that the narrative logic of "I" versus the "other" only further contributes to the issue of racial prejudice that is pervasive throughout Malaysian society.

## CONCLUSION: A REFLECTIVE NOTE

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated how the narrative structure of *Nasi Lemak 2.0* has contributed towards reinforcing the ideological construct of racism or the social engineering project that has continued the politics of ethnic segregation in post-colonial Malaysia.

Evidence has been demonstrated through the narrative structures and their logic, as well as the cinematic construction of the key protagonist, played by Namewee himself. It is argued that these structures have given rise to a specific ethnicised tone within the film's narrative, and that this ethnicised tone inevitably reinforces or has justified certain racist ideologies at important plot points. Consequently, the film's subtext only naturalises certain stereotypes about various ethnic groups, failing to provide a reflexive space for an alternative or oppositional reading. Despite Namewee's self-claimed position of promoting understanding amongst the various ethnic groups, his stereotypical portrayal of the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia (i.e. Malay, Chinese and Indian) speaks in favour of the ignorance and superficiality of common prejudices and misperceptions amongst the general public. Although this film employs a multi-language approach to represent the three major ethnic groups in an ensemble manner and to convey the theme of multiculturalism, the subtext of the film must be understood in the broader sociopolitical context of post-colonial Malaysia, a country that has long been divided by ethnic-based politics. By sarcastically representing the stereotypes of the politically recognised three major ethnic groups in West Malaysia, Namewee has done little more than to reinforce Furnivall's idea of pluralism with the old mentality of an ethnically divided polity. As such, Namewee, perhaps unwittingly, has only acted to further the interest of the political elites in terms of maintaining the status quo. On the one hand, ruling elites will sometimes artificially create conflict and tension amongst various groups in response to their political need to maintain the status quo. On the other hand, film constitutes an entertainment cultural product, and as such, the medium is often used to reinforce racial ideologies that emphasise populist sentiments for commercial gain. If the discussion surrounding the construction of ethnicity in Malaysian cinema is to move to another level of social justice and ethnic equality, then a proper construction of equal spectatorship is needed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

**NOTES**

1.  "1Malaysia" is a political slogan created by public relations experts to help the former Prime Minister Najib Razak to create a new image in 2009. For more details, see Chin (2010).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Abdul Rahman Embong. 2001. The culture and practice of pluralism in postcolonial Malaysia. In *The politics of multiculturalism: Pluralism and citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. R. W. Hefner. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 59–85.

Althusser, L. 1994. Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation). In *Mapping ideology*, ed. S. Žižek. London: Verso, 100–140.

Bordwell, D. and K. Thompson. 2008. *Film art: An introduction*, 8th ed. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

Cheah, B. 2007. Malaysia: Envisioning the nation at the time of independence. In *Rethinking ethnicity and nation-building: Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Fiji in comparative perspective*, ed. Abdul Rahman Embong. Selangor, Malaysia: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia, 40–56.

Chin, J. 2010. Malaysia: The rise of Najib and 1Malaysia. In *South East Asian affairs*, ed. D. Singh. Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies, 162–177.

Chua, T. 2010. How racist is racist? The Namewee, Siti Inshah aftermath. *Malaysiandigest.com*, 7 September. http://www.malaysiandigest.com/opinion/8229-how-racist-is-racist-the-namewee-siti-inshah-aftermath.html.

Field, S. 1979. *Screenplay: The foundations of screenwriting*, 3rd ed. New York: Dell Publishing Company.

Furnivall, J. S. 1944. *Netherlands India: A study of plural economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gomez, E. T., J. Saravanamuttu and M. Mohamad. 2013. Malaysia's New Economic Policy: Resolving horizontal inequalities, creating inequities? In *The New Economic Policy in Malaysia: Affirmative action, ethnic inequalities, and social justice*, eds. E. T. Gomez and J. Saravanamuttu. Singapore: NUS Publishing and ISEAS Publishing, 1–28.

Hassan Abdul Muthalib. 2013. *Malaysian cinema in a bottle: A century (and a bit more) of wayang*. Selangor, Malaysia: Merpati Jingga.

Hatta Azad Khan. 1997. *The Malay cinema*. Selangor, Malaysia: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Hefner, R. W. 2001. *The politics of multiculturalism: Pluralism and citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Heng, P. -K. 1998. Chinese responses to Malay hegemony in Peninsular Malaysia (1957–1996). In *Cultural contestations: Mediating identities in a changing Malaysian society*, ed. Z. Ibrahim. London: ASEAN Academic Press, 51–82.

Heng, P. -K. and M. -L. Sieh-Lee. 2000. The Chinese business community in Peninsular Malaysia, 1957–1999. In *The Chinese in Malaysia*, eds. K. –H. Lee and C. –B. Tan. New York: Oxford University Press, 123–168.

Khoo, G. C. 2014. Imagining hybrid cosmopolitan Malaysia through Chinese kung fu comedies: *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) and *Petaling Street Warriors* (2011). *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 8(1): 57–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2013.875730.

———. 2007. Just-do-it-(yourself): Independent filmmaking in Malaysia. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 8(2): 227–247. https://doi.org/10.1080/13583880701238696.

Loh, F. K. -W. 2009. *Old vs new politics in Malaysia: State and society in transition*. Selangor, Malaysia: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre.

*Malaysiakini*. 2016. In FFM row, director resigns, cinematographer returns trophies in trash bag, 9 August. https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/351713#KvbqWfQePWDH1s9h.99.

———. 2011. Utusan buat laporan polis ke atas Namewee, 2 October. https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/177507.

———. 2007. Gov't in quandary over YouTube rapper, 9 August. http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/70994.

Mayne, J. 1993. *Cinema and spectatorship*. London: Routledge.

Means, G. P. 1970. *Malaysian politics*. London: University of London Press.

Namewee. 2010a. *Namewee* 黃明志*ONE MALAYSIA MOVIE PC*記者招待會. *YouTube*, 17 March. http://youtube.com/watch?v=VZBNy7KBCac.

———. 2010b. Part 1 黃明志要見首相 Namewee wanna meet PM Malaysia! Malaysian must see! *YouTube*, 1 December. http://youtube.com/watch?v=TYH3aUT_VwQ.

Ngo, S. S. 2011. The Shaw Brothers' *Wuxia Pian*: An early identity and business-cultural connection for the Chinese in Malaya. *Kajian Malaysia* 29(1): 75–93.

Raman, A., A. R. Zulkifli and Y. P. Lee. 2010. Rais: Locally produced non-BM movies can enjoy tax rebate. *The Star Online*, 31 August. https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2010/08/31/rais-locally-produced-nonbm-movies-can-enjoy-tax-rebate/.

Tan, S. B. 1993. *Bangsawan: A social and stylistic history of popular Malay opera South-East Asian cultural series*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

*The Star Online*. 2016. Film Directors' Association official quits over language segregation issue, 9 August. https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2016/08/09/film-directors-association-official-quits-over-language-segregation-issue/#hKIT3YmMz2JoyLYf.99.

Wan Zawawi Ibrahim. 2005. The cultural context of Malaysian film policy: The new Malaysian cinema. In *Seminar on film industries in Asia and Europe: A platform for experiences' sharing*, ed. L. Feilberg. Singapore: Asia-Europe Foundation, 31–35.

Wang, G. 1959. *A short history of the Nanyang Chinese*. Singapore: Eastern Universities Press.

Willemen, P. 1976. Voyeurism, the look and Dwoskin. *Afterimage* 6: 44–50.